

The Story of Tam O' Shanter



One dark and stormy night, after a long day at market, and an even longer evening sitting in his favourite pub, Tam climbed on to his favourite old mare Meg and set off on his long road home, across the dark and rain swept moor. Sometime later, around midnight, he approached an old ruined church in Alloway. The church was reputed to be haunted and also a place where witches gathered. As he drew close to the ruined church, Tam thought he heard a strange music and it looked as if it was full of light! Tam convinced himself that he was not afraid of the supernatural and he edged his horse forward so that he could look through the ribs of a crumbling gothic window and satisfy his curiosity. What a sight he saw! For there inside the roofless church, dancing around a huge bonfire, was a coven of witches and warlocks, with the devil himself as a huge shaggy black dog, playing the pipes. Tam sat on his horse, gazing at the sight of the ugly old men and women leaping about. Then he noticed that one of them was not old. She was young and beautiful and she flung herself into the wild Scottish dances with complete abandon. As she danced, she threw off all her clothes except a short petticoat known in Scotland as a Cutty Sark. This young witch was called Nannie. Tam didn't know her name, all he knew that she was a wonderful dancer and all he could see was her great beauty. As he watched, her dancing became wilder and wilder and Tam became more and more entranced. Finally, he was so carried away he roared out, "Well done 'Cutty Sark!" And an instant, the bonfire went out and in the pitch black, the witches and warlocks screamed their fury at the man who had ruined their party. They poured out, racing towards Tam, shrieking for vengeance. Tam, in desperate fear for his life and soul, spurred Meg on a race to save them both. He set Meg galloping madly towards the bridge across the river Doon, with the witches screeching in hot pursuit. Tam knew that witches could not cross running water and if he could just cross the keystone of the bridge he would be safe. Meg realised her master's peril and galloped furiously for the bridge but Nannie, speeding ahead of the pack of witches, started to gain on them. Tam glanced back and in terror, saw the wild figure getting closer and closer, reaching out for him. The foaming mare strained for the bridge ahead but, almost there, Nannie flung herself at Tom, stretching out an arm to grab him. Meg, however, made a final desperate leap for safety and crossed the keystone with her master clinging to her back and left nothing in Nannie's hand but a large lump of her own tail. Tam was safe and his story served as a warning to all those who would stay out drinking late and have to cross the moor at the witching hour. Nannie went on to become a feared presence around Ayr and Galloway. As for poor Meg's tail, it never grew back. And that is why John Willis, who ordered the building of this fast and beautiful ship, called her the Cutty Sark. It is also why, if you look closely at the outstretched arm of the figure head, in its clenched hand in its clenched hand ... is a grey mare's tail...

the end

Places connected to the legend of Tam o' Shanter



*The Bridge o' Doon. is
located near Alloway
in South Ayrshire and
crosses the River Doon.
It was rebuilt in the
18th century.*

*The
church*

